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Comments for “Higher Education Policies in Developing Countries” (September 21-22, 2015)

My informal comments here are inspired by the rich edited volume (Schwartzman, S., Pinheiro, R., and Pillay, P. (Eds.). (2015). *Higher education in the BRICS countries: Investigating the pact between higher education and society*. Dordrecht: Springer). Looking at the book as a whole, it is clear that while global influences are undeniably significant, they may well be exaggerated in the broader scholarly literature – dominated as that literature is by work in English, much of it derived from earlier studies of higher education institutions and systems in the USA and the UK. In fact, this is arguably an enduring constraint for the field globally, the ways in which “organizational studies” (and organizational theories, as well as their many successors) emerged from close study of US higher education institutions in the 1960s-1970s, and which has endured as an essential analytical paradigm. This allegedly “global” or universal paradigm and the often-uncritical analysis of globalization that followed seem to consistently underestimate the enduring salience of attempts to articulate and implement *national* strategies in the higher education sector (and in the related areas of national mobility programs and national innovation systems). That globalization paradigm has also underestimated or perhaps simply failed to carefully study the complex and subtle ways in which regional and local governments, local businesses and industries, and higher educational institutions have all interacted in this new context. The *BRICS* edited volume attempts to explore – in depth and detail – precisely these gaps in our understanding. Taken as a whole, the volume outlines numerous ways in which the higher education systems in Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) have been strategically aligned with the Western paradigm – as well as the significant ways in which policymakers have attempted to chart their own distinctive paths, especially around issues of state policy for “modernization” and balancing the public and private sectors.

The chapters in the edited volume also raise exceptionally important points about the historical legacies and “path dependencies” within the various systems – the role of state (or party-state) power (especially in Russia and China); conflicts around social exclusion and inclusion (especially in Brazil, India and South Africa); and ongoing negotiations around system-wide principles, policies, and practices. The picture as a whole is of major higher education systems undergoing exceptionally rapid expansion and fitful transitions to align with emerging social realities, even as state policy and “steering” capacities as well as institution-level capacities for implementation struggle to keep up with those changes. An especially important theme throughout the volume’s chapters is the relative lack of comparable data or reliable information on *what is actually happening* within the diverse types of classrooms – how amid rapid privatization and diversification, *we know remarkably little about what students are actually doing or learning*, perhaps especially around student learning outcomes and longer-term career paths. As Simon Schwartzman remarks, there are undeniably powerful and shared global dynamics, yet their “role is limited, however, by the resilience of existing cultures, institutions and stakeholders, as well as by their own financial limitations” (p. 6-7). This illuminates very clearly the essential tension or dynamic at play throughout all of the various cases: the attempts in all of the BRICS nations to articulate coherent national and global strategies for the tertiary sector; which is complicated precisely by the limits of state funding and steering mechanisms in a context of rapid expansion and partial globalization; and all of which unfolds amid the at-least-rhetorical or conceptual embrace of market and neoliberal principles, however tempered those may be by larger national development strategies and parochial interests.

This latter point highlights another large anomaly looming over much of this, and that regards the role of the USA (and I very much value the fact that this volume does not fixate on that influence, as so much of the literature does often unthinkingly – which is the very definition of hegemony, of course). While the USA is undeniably at the heart of the global higher education system – as a nation, the USA arguably lacks any *coherent* national development strategy to manage global competition in the sector

(and has been systematically cutting funding for international education, the study of foreign languages, and for Fulbright and other programs). Since the end of the Cold War, the USA has relied upon “market” mechanisms (and a *laissez faire* attitude), while at the same time seeking to dominate those allegedly-neutral market processes through GATS and the combined power of USA (and UK) corporate interests (through university expansion programs, for-profit providers, publishing and testing conglomerates, and now the “market” for products like MOOCs). This of course means the BRICS nations (and many others) are in the position of having to respond to or engage with these global hegemonic and corporate forces – to maintain the coherence and integrity of their national systems (which most seem to have done reasonably well); to regulate and manage the presence and role of global or other for-profit providers (with very mixed results, in most cases global for-profit providers seem better monitored than often-powerful domestic private institutions); to establish and fund new state-funded global fellowships and academic mobility programs to engage more purposefully or strategically with these global processes of change (in almost all cases, at least initially quite successfully); and to create programs to attract back their often far-flung diasporas of scientific and professional talent (about which it is too soon to judge). Again, the chapters collected together in the edited volume do an exceptional job of navigating through precisely these currents – and continually highlight the difficulty, especially, of regulating the growing and often non-transparent private and for-profit providers. In almost all cases, state policy seems to be struggling to find the most functional balance between regulation and institutional autonomy, while still holding on to larger visions of state-led national development, sectoral integrity, and policy coherence.

As an aside, I would suggest that there may be another dimension of the BRICS phenomenon that might merit more analysis – perhaps especially between Russia and India as well as between Russia and China (in the latter case in part through the mechanisms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or SCO), and that is the rather “hidden” world of high-level scientific and professional cooperation in the defense and security realms. I am reminded of this because in the case of the USA, the Department of

Defense's International Military Education and Training (IMET) and related programs are significantly greater in terms of funding and personnel involved than all of the "civilian" international education and mobility programs combined. Much of this type of global and bilateral activity operates "behind-the-scenes" through military service academies and defense-sector funded contracts with other higher education institutions, as well as in the realms of procurement, supply-chain management, and global logistics (around the arms trade and related industries such as aerospace and information technology). One can surmise that similar cooperative mechanisms are in play between at least some of the BRICS nations, which in turn inevitably shapes cooperation and elite networks in the corporate, technological, and professional realms, and thus -- inevitably -- in and between leading universities as well. These are, if you will, potentially significant geostrategic "counter-currents" to our prevailing Western-dominated image of neoliberal globalization, with focuses only on the "trade in services" and civilian mobility.

Finally, another persistent theme throughout the volume is the often scattered or disjointed connections between the public and private sectors in the various tertiary systems -- how precisely (if at all) do the private (or for-profit) institutions act as "laboratories" for experiments in curriculum and instruction (or in social engagement or in flexible scheduling), or are they simply "safety valves" for excess demand? Have the lower income groups and formerly-excluded ethnic and minority populations who often dominate those more commercial programs essentially been sold inferior products, and thus a fraudulent vision of social inclusion and upward mobility? How do the new providers influence policies and practices in the public institutions, presumably especially through competition around professional training and career education? Have recent efforts by state-funded or public-sector universities to move into that career-relevant and professional-skills market been successful, and if so how specifically? How coherent -- or how compromised by underfunding or conflicts-of-interest -- are the state regulatory or accreditation mechanisms for these new providers? How much do we actually know about what goes on *inside* of these new providers, a gap that may be especially stark in the online or digital realm? For that

matter, how much do we actually know (in the form of ethnographically rich studies) about how the *faculty and student experience* is changing in public or state-funded tertiary institutions? The chapters collected in this volume offer a detailed map of the policy and institutional terrain around many of these issues, but many of these more subtle cultural and pedagogical issues merit further exploration. Two final and deliberately provocative thoughts: is it possible that the global rise of this for-profit and private sector – however necessary it may have been in meeting explosive market demand – may also be undermining the *quality and integrity* of national research systems and national innovation policies? What are the long-term consequences of rapid growth in the types of institutions that produce little or no original research, that rely overwhelmingly on “adjunct” or part-time instructors, and that contribute little to the “knowledge base” for high-level teaching and educational publishing? What if “disruptive innovation” is in actual fact *only* disruptive and not conducive to system-wide or sustainable educational innovation? What precisely are the national policies and institutional practices most appropriate to “manage” such disruptions and to foster real innovation in research, teaching and learning? All in all, the edited volume establishes a vitally important foundation for exploring these and other issues.